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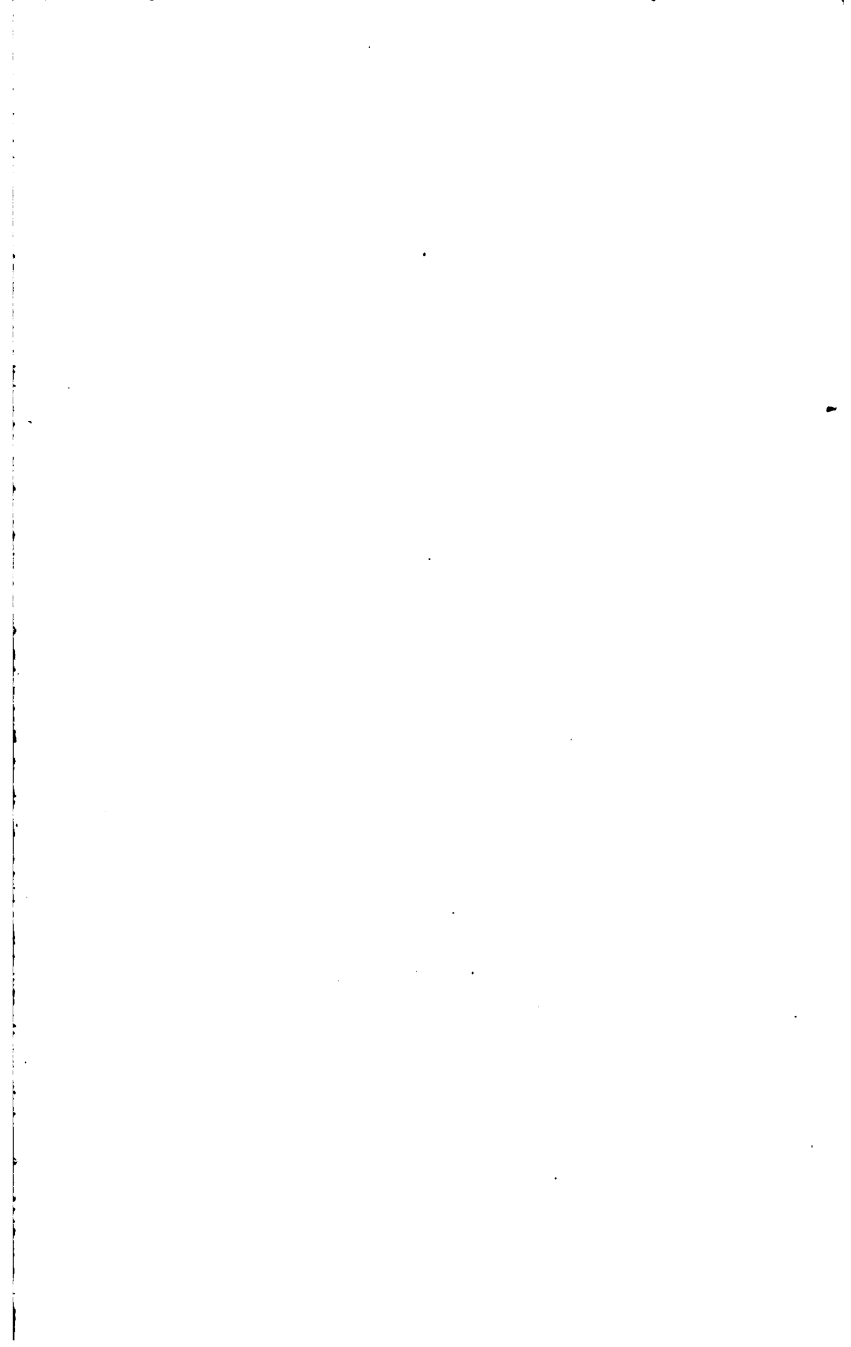


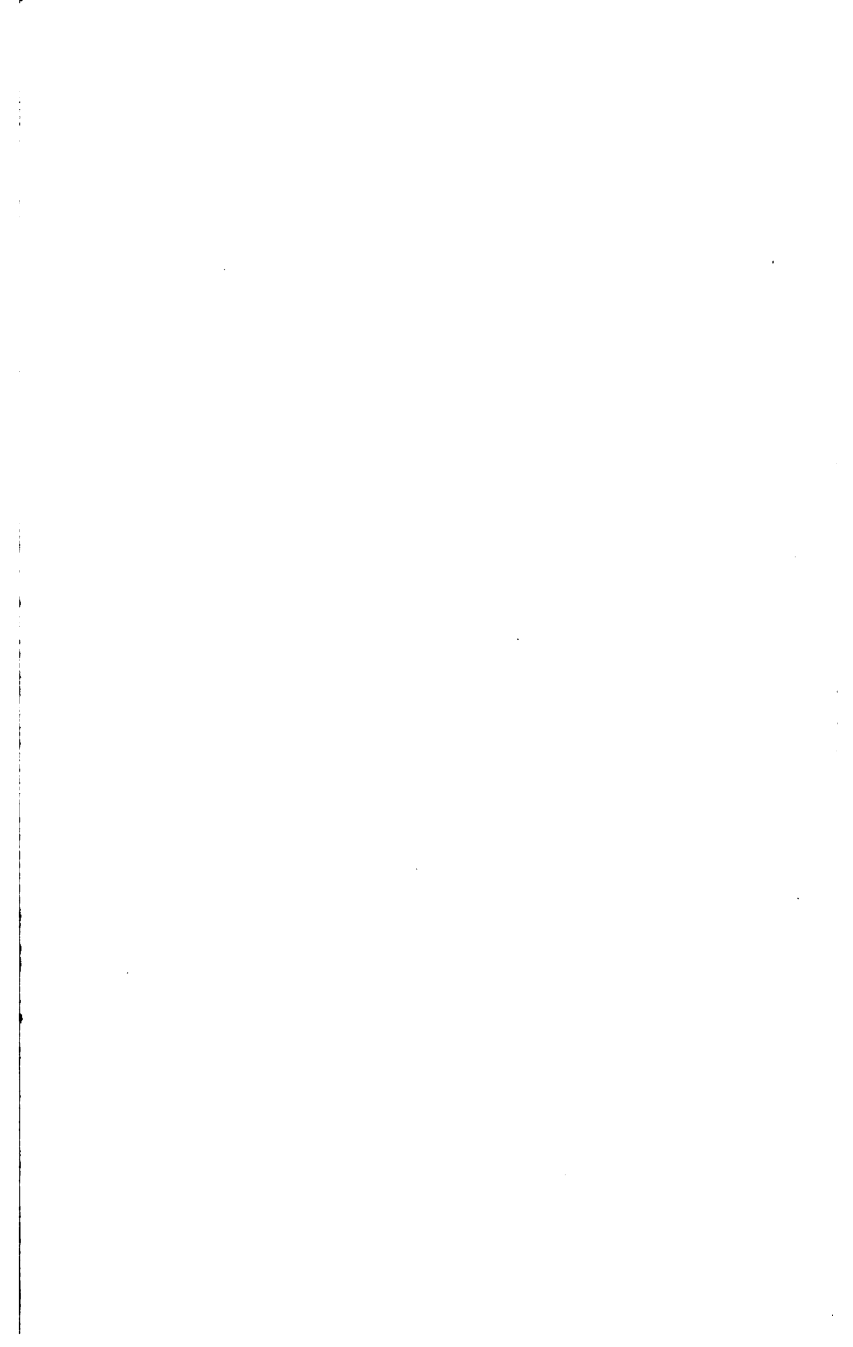
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**THE RELIGIOUS USES OF  
MEMORY**





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# THE RELIGIOUS USES OF MEMORY

## A SERMON

BY

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**THE RELIGIOUS USES OF  
MEMORY**

*And thou shalt remember all the way  
which Jehovah thy God hath led thee.*

THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY  
EIGHTH CHAPTER, SECOND VERSE

## THE RELIGIOUS USES OF MEMORY

**T**HE book of Deuteronomy is a notable example of the religious uses of memory. It was written during a crisis in the history of the Hebrews, and it is the first serious attempt at a philosophy of that history. The text is at once a statement of its theme and a summary of its main content. It is emphatically the book of remembrance.

Under the guidance and protection of Jehovah, Moses had led the chosen race out of the house of bondage to the verge of the land of their adoption. A disorganized band of fugitives had been transformed into a consolidated people. Their wanderings and privations in the wilderness had imparted a stern but salutary discipline to these spiritless helots. The former slaves of Egypt became the conquerors of Canaan. Despite the fierce resistance of surrounding tribes, they established themselves in a land of fertility and beauty, and their heroical story was transmitted to posterity.

God's purposes in this emancipation and nationalizing of a despised and abject race were infinitely larger than even the Hebrews conceived them to be. He had covenanted with their father Abraham that in his seed should all the nations of the earth be blessed. From this believing ancestor, whose faith was reckoned onto him for righteousness, there sprang that illustrious line of law-givers, psalmists, and prophets; men who have illuminated mankind with the radiance of their spiritual visions. The religious instinct of the race was to find its highest expression in Israel as a peculiar people, and in its theocracy as the holy commonwealth.

These purposes were enshrined in the Deuteronomic code. But side by side with them is an unsparing portrayal of the repeated apostacies of the Israelites. Their disobedience and disloyalty, their stubbornness and continual backsliding are set over against the signal deliverances which Jehovah had wrought in their behalf. And the punishments which follow these transgressions are depicted with fearful severity.

The book, like an angel standing in the path, solemnly adjures this stiff-necked and self-willed race to recall the numberless experiences of the past. It would warn them against the perilous indifference toward God worship and duty engendered by prosperity. It beseeches them to turn from every distraction of the present and seek the Author of their blessings in the light of their consecrated remembrance.

Yet not alone for these ancient tribes, but for all time, and for all people was the message of Deuteronomy given. Whether the book be ideal or actual, whatever sources lie behind it, its moral purport remains the same. It offers the wisest and loftiest remonstrance against every God-forgetting age. It speaks to the very heart of those who are so disastrously preoccupied that, without any studied purpose, they steadily drift away from the center of attachment. Neither history nor the passing hour have divine meaning for them. Faith grows dim, hope dwindles, love waxes cold, every moral susceptibility is deadened. Then on the listless ears



of these aliens the command of this Scripture peals forth like a midnight warning bell—**THOU SHALT REMEMBER**—and whether they hear or forbear, obey or reject, rest assured that ere the last hour of conscious memory departs, remember they must.

The faculty of retrospect is one of the highest employments of the memory, and the memory is the superior attribute of the mind. All principles of projected efficiency largely depend upon experience. The statesman endeavors to guide his country's affairs in the light of what has been. The judge is governed by the precedents of human justice. These vocations have seldom, if ever, been successfully followed except by those who saw that the roots of the present lie deep in the past. We are indebted to the men and women who have wisely handled our yesterdays in behalf of our tomorrows. Whatever may be urged against the retrospective attitude, it faces the majesty of facts; the purely prospective attitude peers uncertainly into the fortuitous and the fanciful.

The modern era has been so well furnished on many sides, so full of progress, so distinguished for exciting discoveries, so pregnant with new possibilities, that certain thinkers are inclined to neglect those eras which went before it. They insist that these possibilities will not be realized until we have freed ourselves from the fetters of antiquity. Our convictions must not be allied to the revelations of the Law and the Prophets; they must be imbedded in our present knowledge of God, of Christianity, and of the virtues.

Their insistence is reasonable within proper limits, but they sometimes forget that healthy revolt against the tyranny of dead shibboleths is one thing: rebellion against ageless and fundamental verities is quite another. Those verities are as closely related to present excellence and well-doing as are the strata of the earth to its fauna and flora. Should we attempt such an insurrection, a non-progressive infancy would penalize our folly. It cuts us off from the supply, it separates faith from the career of faith, it divorces us from the accumulated spiritualities

which enrich history. The living streams that flow through contemporary civilization are fed from the great ranges behind them, where Christ stands supreme. Their fountains are in the historical personalities and significant movements which are at least comparable with anything we know today.

Ours is the age of distributed genius, and we have not at this moment the intellectual equal of Plato, nor of Socrates. There is no man in the present church who can reveal the heart of God as could the great prophets of Jewry or the apostles of Christianity. In the cycles of time, there have been alternations of twilight and night, dawn and day; periods when the Kingdom of God came with power, and others when it seemed to linger. Spiritual evolution has had its stages of vigorous growth, followed by those of apparent lassitude, and these again have been superseded by overwhelming outbursts of regenerative vitality. We must ever return to these resources, we must constantly ponder them, and we must not allow the dominant hour to obstruct

our vision of a mighty and a gracious history. "Thou shalt remember *all the way* which Jehovah thy God hath led thee."

The aims of many reformers are nothing if not radical. They flout either the past or the present, more generally the former, and for their one grape would the whole vine destroy. They neglect the empire for the sake of a particular province, and because of this contraction of interest often injure the cause they seek to serve. No phase of history can be thus ignored; from its first dawn to its last occurrence it is inseparably associated with all we strive to be and to do. The planting and training of the Christian church, the growth and inter-relation of every part of the social structure, and our own individual career, should come within the scope of retrospect.

In the patience of God, these organizations have endured the countless changes of the flight of time, and a millennial extension is but a day in his sight. In the purpose of God, they will fulfil their meaning at the propitious moment, and this so quickly that a na-

tion shall be born in a day, and the day shall perfect the work of a thousand years. We strengthen them and we fortify ourselves when we call to mind the former times. We cease to be weary in well-doing, we kindle anew our zeal for righteousness, we increase our reverence for law and literature and philanthropy, when we name those great spirits who have been an epitome of mankind, such as Wesley, Washington, Marshall, Milton, and John Howard. It is remembrance which enables us to do this, it ministers to our profoundest feelings, to our character, and to our affections. It places religion in its rightful seat of authority, and on either side it enthrones virtue and wisdom.

Over all it sheds the halo of its purity and mellowing influences. We seldom see men or measures clearly until, in its interval, we have gained the correct perspective. We do not love with tenderness and beauty divine unless remembrance and imagination blend their enchantments with our affection. The expansion of faith depends upon these inward powers of

apprehension. By means of retrospect we discover the ways of God toward men, and how that he has been a very present help in every time of trouble, the abundant Giver of all human good. The rule of right, the sovereign quality of mercy, the requirements of moral perfection, and the beauty of holiness, are no chance occupants of our epoch or of any other. They are found wherever the universal Spirit has evoked the aspirations of the race, they have their habitation in all the conditions of the past, they have reigned in the race always and everywhere, and no subject mind has escaped their control.

The interpretation of the text shows that the memory to which it refers is also a personal function. It exhorts us to remember *our own way*, the direct dealings of God with our individual life, and how these have instructed, chastened, and humbled us, and discovered our inner self, and whether or no, in motive and in deed, we would obey the divine commandment.

For memory is distinctively a conscious agent, which testifies to the re-

ality and permanence of our own existence. It is at once the condition and the proof of our self-identity. It brings before us the sense of that vast living, loving, moving, inspiring Spirit who dwells in every soul and makes it the audience-chamber of the Eternal.

Were memory withdrawn, every mind would be a blank, retaining nothing except momentary sensations which, like the foam-flecks on the wave, are lost as soon as found. Thought feeds on reflection, reflection fastens on experience, experience is reproduced by remembrance, and progress depends on every link in the chain. How necessary, then, is this wonderful gift of God for all spiritual enlightenment!

Every personal event leaves some ingredients behind; it passes, but these are retained. The retention may be unconscious, and one of the strangest aspects of this endowment is its facility for reviving in unexpected ways and places the occurrences we supposed were forgotten. In an unprepared hour, the far-off is instantaneously brought nigh, our former deeds troop in unannounced, faded scenes and

dreamland faces flash forth again with startling vividness. We renew our intercourse with the departed, and with those delightful prospects to which distance lends additional charm. We hear once more the beloved voices which have lost the accent of pain and the tremulousness of fear. For though we have a glorious fellowship of saints on earth, some of the noblest tokens of our communion do not proceed from our visible intercourse. They emerge again from the fruitful years that men miscall dead, and in the joy and blessing of such reveries, we understand how beneficent it is that part of the past in all the present lives.

St. Augustine, reflecting on these truths, exclaimed, "I came at last to the fields and courts of memory, where are treasures of unnumbered impressions on every hand. There I met all I had discovered by the senses, the heavens, the earth, the sea, and all that in them is. There also I found God, and there I found myself, and what I had been and done, and when and where and in what way."

*"There also I found God."* Such is



the chief reward of those who explore "the fields and courts of memory," as did the great Bishop of Hippo. They are full of the evidences of the Supreme Mind, and of the Supreme Memory. So actually involved is the Deity in man that, great as is the universe beyond us, the universe within is almost greater. Buried in what Arthur Hallam so finely called "the abysmal depths of personality" are our own inviolable experiences of grace and of guidance. There abide our secret life, our indisturbable peace, and our hope, both sure and steadfast, of immortality to come. The deeper we sink the shafts of meditation into these hidden springs, the more abundantly will their healing currents flow.

Every life is divinely planned and sustained, and when we search out the ways of God in this respect, we increase our present confidence and strengthen our hold on the future. A gracious Power, not ourselves, has defended us, a superior Wisdom has gently cleared our path. We have been saved from our own follies and sinfulness. Our sorrows have been healing ministries

for good. Our afflictions have redeemed us from pride and corruption. We have been brought forth with a pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. The veil that hid tomorrow from our eyes has been gradually lifted to their prepared sight. The eater has been forced to give us meat, and the destroyer to yield us sweetness. Those things which we imagined were against us have issued to our advantages. The Heavenly Father has devised means whereby his banished children be not driven from him. He has provided for remedial effects even in our transgressions, and where sin did abound grace has much more abounded. Crowning all, eternal love has diffused its warmth and light upon our darkest passages and dispelled the shadows of the dreariest night.

This is a social consciousness of God, in which all believers can rejoice together. It inspires the exultant strain of praise, the "endless Alleluia" of the worshipping church. It is the cause of that tranquillity which enables us to rest in the Lord and wait patiently for him. When health departs, or

friends are few, in his omnipotence we are strong, resolute, girded for the fray. Remembering these things, we glow with grateful adoration, and burn with desire for the fullness of the vision of God; for the satisfaction of those who awake in his likeness.

The text does not deal with the Christian conception of God as our Father, but those who have been the recipients of his unfolding self-manifestation know that, while he is the Jehovah of the Hebrews, he is also the All-Wise and All-Loving Parent who has sent forth the Lord Jesus as the revelation of his nature. And for our apprehension of Christ, it is necessary that he should not only be known as a present and living reality, but that this knowledge should be supplemented by the historical portraiture of the Gospels. Here memory again plays its important part. Those records were written in the light of a loving and stimulated remembrance. This remembrance was at Christ's own solicitation, and he instituted the Memorial Feast on the night of his Passion in order that his work and his purposes

should be lodged in the breasts of the disciples. Those who truly love Jesus will likewise remember Jesus; they will keep in mind the things in which they have been instructed. They, too, can follow him from the arms of Mary and the hillside at Nazareth, through all the scenes of ceaseless ministry and complete abandonment to the Eternal Will, until they bow before that dramatic concentration of all his service, his submission, his obedience—THE CROSS.

This scriptural injunction stipulates what we shall remember and to what ends. It takes shape from its surroundings, and it is meant to conserve that view of life which is transfused with the sense of God's overruling providence. Apart from this conservation there is no purpose discernible either in the world or in man. The forty years in the wilderness were a proof that God intended the elected nation to be his instrument. They were also an assurance to everyone who participated in them that their strong Deliverer had kept his covenant. This assurance has lain behind the making

of hosts of men and of many nations: not only Israel, but the democracies that now govern the world have arisen to their magnitude because of their faith in Jehovah's guiding hand.

There is no provision in the Deuteronomic code for those temperamental tendencies which discolor memory and usurp its religious uses. It is a serious thing to thus interfere with the important processes we are describing. Yet how many have hidden away from God because of the melancholy, the unavailing grief, and the bitter leaven of uncontrolled recollections.

Some project across their reflections a wistful pensiveness which dims the horizon of approaching age. They feel their strength decrease, the limbs grow stiffer, each movement less exact, each nerve more loosely strung. And they contrast this debility with the vigor and the buoyancy of youth. For them there is no sunset glow, softened and serene, a golden day's decline which reflects its effulgence even on the eastern skies. With the added tale of years and physical infirmity, they have lost the compensation of those whose rapt pro-

phetic eyes see the world as from a height, and with a heart profoundly stirred prepare to chant their *Nunc Dimittis*.

Others violate the spirit of this Scripture by vindictively accusing their own generation. Nothing is more useless or demoralizing, but they persist in it and mourn the evil times on which they have fallen. God has forsaken his world. The complex scheme of life is but a jumble of fatalistic remnants. They brood over this confusion and invoke memory in the interests of their jaundice, scanning the past through a distorted medium. One cannot deny that they have some usefulness: they frequently act as a sobering influence upon a nation like our own and restrain its reckless optimisms. But, when this is said, it still remains that more frequently they take out of life the faith and hope which life must have. Matthew Arnold has voiced their sentiments in many of his poems and in none so sadly as in *The Grand Chartreuse* —

“Our fathers water’d with their tears  
This sea of time whereon we sail,

Their voices were in all men's ears  
 Who passed within their puissant hail.  
 Still the same ocean round us raves  
 But we stand mute and watch the waves."

Yet nothing is more sure than is God's oversight of all the varied elements of life. Our times are in his hands, the reactionary as well as the progressive periods, the days of doubt as well as the days of faith; and if we find it hard to rejoice and easy to mourn, let us not forget that he pours the old wine and the new, the bitter and the sweet, into the chalice of life, and that when he has filled the cup, the draught gives health and power.

Still others sink down into a hopeless apathy where faith is an exploded dream. The widest scope of effort cannot touch the regions of eternal change and mystery. The end finds men with all their unsolved problems and unsatisfied yearnings and vain desires, inheritors of nothing save

"The vasty hall of death."

Such reminiscences conduct those who indulge them to the vaults of despair. They are crippled in spirit by their

pagan use of memory's powers; their imagination is an evil genius, it dwarfs their character and hampers their service.

It was Carlyle's ill-fate that though he could remember God with reverence he could scarcely tolerate men. He trusted in the Jehovah of his Calvinistic fathers, but with a few exceptions, and these not always wisely chosen, he despised the divine image in his fellow creatures. He expatiated at length upon their monstrous errors and follies. He surmised these would prevail in the future as heretofore, and he found what he believed to be sufficient proof to support his disheartening conclusions. Yet his immense knowledge of the past should have taught Carlyle that, however undeserving, the human family in its solidarity is the offspring of God and the heir of his promises. But an unpurged memory reacted upon him and he spent his last days crying and cursing in the wilderness.

It becomes us to act worthily as the sons of God, and to assume from all our knowledge of his ways toward us in the past that he will not allow us to be defeated. We shall yet slay the



beasts that ravage us. Whatever our past errors and omissions and wickedness, we have the privilege to solicit and receive God's forgiveness for them: then we should wisely forget them. The things which are behind us may shed the light of experience upon the pathway we must tread; but when they are simply weights and hindrances we are to cast them aside. Let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto him who is both Author and Finisher of our faith, and set free for utmost effort by a proper use of retrospect. Then even the severest visitations may chasten, but they cannot abolish our joy, nor take from us the lawful striving which shall at last be crowned.

The text may seem to have no application for those whose youth has known no history, but while they rejoice in their new-born freedom, if they would remove sorrow from their hearts and put away evil from their flesh, they must remember now their Creator before the cheerless prospects of a morally destitute age afflict them.

We return at sunset to eat of the fruit of our own way and to be filled with our own devices. This return is accomplished by an automatic memory which operates independently of our wishes. In that recurrence of youthful recollections, happy is the man who can say of his juvenile period, as said the sun-dial which Hazlitt saw in Italy: "I make record of only the sunny hours." And happier still is the man who has obeyed the words of counsel and encouragement which attended his manhood's dawn. He who has received the large and seasonable gifts of the outer world, who has heard the men and women themselves who were behind the things that made them known, who has profited by their example, will bask in the sunshine of his later day. He will remain alive to the great sights and sounds and to the tender influences of the seasons. In his intercourse with men he will preserve the sanity and the charity which should be the distinctive virtues of maturity. If in him love's purification was early made, he may dwell upon its sweet memories to the very

end, and all his hours will be filled with beauty and with praise.

What is more destitute or pitiable than a mumbling senility filled with the blackness of darkness and the pangs of the second death. Godless memories crowd in upon it, the lies it has loved come home to roost. There is no holiness, no reverence, no faith, no hope, in that last state. It is the natural sequence of a life whose formative period was spent in prodigality. Would you avoid this dreadful ending? Then pack your reminiscent powers with the thoughts and deeds that well become a son of God. So when your allotted time draws near its close, you will not be all frozen up within and quite the phantom of your former self. You can retire to the kingdom of the mind and challenge the approaching night. For in the spirit's chamber is the quiet sanctuary of many fragrant recollections. Such age is never-withering youth, beneficent, exemplary, vibrant with the presence of the Creator whom you remembered in the days of your youth.

There is a selective memory which is

determined by your moral preferences. These strike the backward path across the teeming fields of recollection. The philosopher retains to the last his reasoning processes, the saint his holy days, the mother the hour when her first-born lay upon her breast. When all else departs the ruling passions linger. The veteran sunk in decay hears his famous captain's name, and at the sound leaps to his feet, erect and military, and cries with a resonant voice, "For Waterloo and the Duke!" Then the sporadic flame dies down and leaves him in his dotage. Memory touched him and the dead revived.

But watch as we may the selective tendencies of memory, it has an involuntary ethical recollection whose motions escape our scrutiny. If men could control these they would lay the ghosts, but conscience employs them without regard to our pleasures or our pains. "Oh! Full of scorpions is my breast, sweet wife," moaned the guilty Macbeth and his guilty spouse could not console him. This ethical memory is an avenger of unconfessed sin. Its chilly reminders, its stinging retorts, its unre-

mitting tortures, are the stuff out of which masters like Poe and Ibsen have woven their tragedies; and when such memories finally come to judgment the secrets of all hearts are bared, the doors of concealed horrors are opened wide, the burnt embers are refired.

Is there no Gospel for such a woeful state? The modern fatalism would scarcely allow that there is. But in the provisions of God's fatherly love, there must be a complete oblivion where men can finally forget; and if our hearts condemn us for saying this, then "God is greater than our hearts, and knoweth all things." A regenerated memory, relieved of its burdens, alive to the noble and the pure, is as great a need as a regenerated heart.

The great Florentine was aware of this. That mediæval theology of which he was the master, and which we too little know, was, in some respects, more humane than our own. Dante tells us that in the last circle of the Purgatorio there flow two rivers which take all blame and remorse out of the alienated will. The candidates for paradise must drink of these ere

they can enter into its passionless renown. The first is the river of Lethe, which is the river of forgetfulness. When they partake of its healing stream their iniquities are fully pardoned, their warfare is ended. They emerge from it, separated from the evils that have beset them, possessors of a peace that passeth understanding.

The second river is the one of which Beatrice speaks:

“Some more pressing care,  
That oft the memory ’reaves, perchance hath  
made  
His mind’s eye dark. But lo, where Eunoe  
flows!  
Lead thither; and, as thou are wont, revive  
His fainting virtue.”

Here all foretastes of approaching bliss are given and the candidates are made ready for the Mount of Light.

This is more than the dream of an inspired imagination; it is the poetical setting of a gracious truth. Even in this life our sins and sorrows lessen, our hot and fevered memories cool. The ameliorating drift of time brings with it many silent gradual changes for the better. We merge from dark-

ness into dawn, the prophecy of greater light to come. While still on pilgrimage, we can humbly pray, "Remember not past years." The Divine response is, "I will cast thy sins behind my back, to be remembered against thee no more forever." Our shame is swallowed up in the bottomless abyss of love, while new delights await us from him who has said, "I will restore unto thee the dew of thy youth."

Thrice blessed is the man who lives the first life well. He can accompany his petition for grace and consolation with the record of a purified heart and a will which has been made obedient to the higher powers, he has remembered all the way Jehovah has led him; he awaits the word that he may enter into the fullness of joy and sit down with Christ on his throne.

THE END

